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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to understand what expressive writing means to themselves and to their students, teachers should explore and reflect on various questions regarding expressive writing theories and practices. For many, self-expression is the basis of all serious writing and an important stage in any act of learning, so it is essential to uncover the assumptions that different schools of expressive writing pedagogy make about the self. The psychological theories of Abraham Maslow, Sigmund Freud, and William James have contributed to American notions of self in the 20th century, and their theories present three distinct views of self, which resonate in the composition texts of Ken Macrorie and James Miller. Maslow's concept of self is a unified entity central to the person's being, and its writing pedagogy emphasizes listening to the inner voice this self projects. Freud's view of self is structured into parts which interact with each other, and these interactions--particularly between the conscious and unconscious--form the self. Strategies employed by this pedagogy encourage the writer to free the repressed part of the self in order to find what is natural and true. The "multiple" view of self, as described by James, is like a fluctuating and changing stream, and multiple view pedagogies incorporate this perception of self into their teaching strategies, focusing on stream-of-consciousness writing. Teachers should question whether they are teaching self-discovery under the guise of "expressive writing." (MM)

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Who's Expressing in "Expressive Writing"?

The most important writing course I had in college was one in which I wrote personal essays, learned to keep a journal and found what I've come to call my own "voice." In whatever I wrote, I began to ask, "Where am I in this?" From then on I always knew that to write anything, I had to believe in it, and that as long as I was honest with myself, anything I wrote would ring true, certainly to me and probably to others. My experience in that course has become even more important to me since I've become a teacher of writing myself. I want my students to have the confidence about their writing that I gained in that one course. So, I am committed to expressive writing practices, partly because of my own writing experience, but also because I feel very strongly that self-expression is the basis of all serious writing and an important stage in any act of learning.

But feeling strongly about expressive writing pedagogy doesn't keep me from questioning and reflecting on it. I want to be able to explain the conviction I feel, and to be open to criticizing and revising my teaching practices. I have therefore been exploring different questions I have about expressive writing theories and practices in an attempt to understand what expressive writing means in our discipline and to carefully consider what

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messages I might be sending to my students when I have them write expressively.

One question this search has led me to is the one I ask in the title of this talk, "Who's Expressing in Expressive Writing?" -- Not "who" a writer projects when writing expressively, though the answer to that might also be interesting and important to my teaching, but "who" do we as writing practitioners and theorists assume the writer's self to be? I have attempted to answer this question by studying different schools of expressive writing pedagogy, trying to uncover the assumptions these different schools make about the self.

I'd like to show you what I've found in one particular school I call the "true self" school for its emphasis on honesty, freeing the self, and writing about personal experiences. Ken Macrorie's Writing to Be Read and Telling Writing and James Miller's Writer, Self, Reality, all of which were published in the late 60s and early 70s, represent this school.

I have been struck by certain psychological notions of self that have found their way into these texts, particularly the psychological theories of Abraham Maslow who was very popular in the 60's, Freud, whose work has dominated the 20th Century, and William James, whose ideas have contributed to American notions of self. These theories present three distinct views of self, one I call a "core" self, which is unified and whole; the second is a "structured" self, made up of parts that work together to form a whole; and the third is a "multiple" self, consisting of many selves who are all part of the same self.

I worry that a conception of self derived from three such distinct theories might lead to a confused pedagogy, especially since these "selves" inform expressive writing practices not singularly and separately as I'll be discussing them today, but so closely tied together that at times Macrorie and Miller might adopt one view of self in one breath and switch to another in the next. I hope to underscore this complexity, and not detract from it, by showing how these three distinct selves appear in these texts.

I'll begin then with the "core" self.

Self as "core"

This first notion of self is a unified and whole entity central to the person's being. The "core" of a person, Abraham Maslow explains, is intrinsically good, an "essence" located somewhere inside the physical body (3). This essence contains all of a person's human potential. As such, it is a source of self-knowledge, truth and wisdom. We are only aware of this essence, if we are able to "hear the impulse voices," that emanate out from it. Maslow believes that if one is able to hear these voices, and thereby "know what one really wants or doesn't want, they will realize their full potential as human beings." To do so is not easy, Maslow explains, because these voices are often faint and easily "drowned out" by the louder voices of society or our own fears. Maslow believes that people should be encouraged not to fear this "core" self but to accept and embrace it (178-185).

I hear resonances of a core self in both Miller and Macrorie. Miller discusses this self openly, while Macrorie only hints at it.

In his discussion of the self in a chapter devoted explicitly to self-discovery through writing, Miller describes the self as "enigmatic" and "elusive," awaiting us "within" (121-22). He characterizes this core as a source of self-knowledge, truth and wisdom when he says, "The ultimate answers to the ultimate questions must come from within" (143). He encourages writers to discover themselves by "bringing into focus . . . stray and random thoughts," a writing technique that forces one to pay attention to the voices within themselves. Such focusing, he says, will help one to discover one's attitudes in the process of writing, thereby "com[ing] to know the self" (113). And finally, he encourages writers to confront their fears of this inner self in order to accept and understand it and therefore realize their potential as human beings (122).

Though Macrorie is not explicit about self-discovery, he does imply that truth is located somewhere inside the person, suggesting this "core" self that is the source of truth, wisdom, and self-knowledge. He directs students to listen to "the world inside" to find out what they feel on a topic so that their writing will be true (Telling, 7, 15-18). He explains that when writers try to tell truths, "a truthtelling voice speaks" (Telling, 158-9). Elsewhere he refers to this voice as one that "sounds in us like conscience" (Telling, 7). Is this truth-laden conscience perhaps an "impulse voice"? I think he suggests that

it is when he writes that "by some power [he] can't name," writers who tell truths use fresh language that reveals something of themselves (Telling, 7).

Based on these traces of Maslow's ideas in these texts, I suggest that one kind of self this school of expressive writing pedagogy assumes is a self full of truth and wisdom located within the person and found by looking inward and listening to the voices this self projects.

Self as "structure"

The second type of self I'm proposing as evident in these texts is a structured self. You can think of this structure as a whole self like the core self, but broken up into parts that all interact with each other; these interactions are what forms the self. Freud views the self divided up this way, focusing on the interaction between the conscious and unconscious parts of the self. Many different stages of Freud's thinking about the self might apply to these texts; however, the model that is most obvious in Macrorie and Miller is his later theory of a self containing "id, ego and superego."

According to Freud's model, the unconscious id represents basic human impulses. The superego, which is part conscious and part unconscious, represents the voice of "conscience." And the ego represents "reason and sanity," and rules over the conscious and unconscious parts of the self (29-30;Rychlak, 33-36). Freud discussed the interaction between these parts of the self in terms of conflict between the ego on one side and the id and superego on the other. The ego must often hold both id and superego down in

order to conform to social pressures that come from outside the self (Rychlak, 33-36). In so doing, the ego "represses" the id's impulses and the voice of the superego, keeping the wishes of these parts of the self from coming into consciousness (Rychlak, 43-44). Freud believed these impulses and thoughts were best left in check (Rychlak, 35). But he also believed that he could help his patients become well by uncovering these repressed thoughts and impulses through *free-association* (Rychlak, 69-70).

Neither Macrorie nor Miller outlines a self composed of "id, ego and superego" as such. But both adopt Freud's conflict model to talk about a part of the self that holds other parts down. Macrorie actually uses Freud's term "ego" for this part of the self, and Miller refers to it as "a willful part of the self" (Telling, 11; Word, 194). Macrorie discusses the conflict writers experience between writing what is true and what others expect as a conflict between their ego, representing the outside world, and another part of themselves hidden somewhere inside. He explains that Engfish, or "phony, pretentious" language results when writers are concerned about conforming to what they believe adults want them to write rather than being honest. He explains that writers have trouble being honest because of "the pressure on [their] ego[s] " (Telling, 11). This ego causes them to use "impressive" language and to put on airs rather than to write naturally and truthfully.

In a similar discussion of pretentious diction and lack of personal voice, Miller explains that writers must "discard" the inhibitions created by schools and society in order to find a true

voice. He also says in an earlier chapter on self-discovery that one reason we have trouble knowing ourselves is that "we have become so conditioned to hiding or suppressing our feelings . . . down deep below the ones that we pretend to have because society demands them" (120). This "willful" conscious part of the self keeps the true feelings from coming through (194).

Both Macrorie's and Millers discussions of repression depart from Freud's structural model of the self in one very important way. Freud believed this repressed material contained thoughts and impulses best left hidden (Rychlak, 35). Macrorie and Miller, on the other hand, both refer to this repressed part of the self as natural and true, and encourage writers to free it.

Their strategies for freeing this repressed self, though, are very similar to one of Freud's strategies for getting at this repressed material. Freud believed he could help his patients most by getting them to be free and open with him so that their egos would allow their unconscious repressed thoughts to come forward into consciousness. The technique he found to be most successful was "free association," or having the client say whatever came to mind, including apparently irrelevant and nonsensical thoughts (Rychlak, 69-70). Macrorie adopts this technique when he tells students to "write freely," "putting down as fast as they can what comes to their minds, without worrying about grammar, punctuation, or spelling " (Telling, 6). Miller's suggested experiments with language also embody this "free association." In one such experiment he tells students, "write everything that comes into your mind. . . . [and] stand off some

distance so as not to intrude . . . ." (23). Both use Freud's technique to create the effect Freud talked about--getting the patient (or writer) to circumvent the ego's will and allow the repressed ideas to come through.

These excerpts show that Macrorie's and Miller's texts do adopt a "structural" view of self, implying that the parts of one's self interact, and that sometimes one part often keeps another, possibly more true part hidden.

Self as multiple

The "multiple" view of self, unlike the core self, is not a single, unified, entity somewhere inside the person. And it is not structured into parts that work together. Instead, think of this self as a fluctuating and changing stream, different from one moment to the next. William James' describes this fluctuating self as a "stream of consciousness"--a constant inner "flow" of thoughts (Principles, 233-36). You might think of the interior monologues of Mrs. Dalloway or Molly Bloom in Ulysses. The inner thoughts of these characters not only belong to them, but actually constitute and create them.

James explains that this inner flow of thought and language is shaped by our experiences as well as by our memories of these experiences; so it fluctuates from moment to moment. As the flow "changes and accumulates thoughts of different moments," it creates not one "unified self," but many selves, all overlapping. What gives this "multiple" self continuity or a sense of "personal unity and sameness" is the experiences and thoughts that each self shares with the one before it ("The Self," 46-49). So this

multiple view of self emphasizes a self that fluctuates and changes, shaped by language and experience, and therefore made up of "successive" selves that all overlap.

James Miller incorporates this "stream-of-consciousness" self directly into his approach to expressive writing. In a section titled "Interior Language," Miller instructs us to "look upon the ceaseless flow of language within us . . . a great flood rolling rapidly along (18). He encourages the reader to see this flow as "revelatory, . . . a window into our minds and our very selves" (19). Miller also quotes William James directly in this section and elsewhere in his book, incorporating this "multiple" view of self explicitly into his approach.

Macrorie, again, is much less explicit in his allusions to this view of the self, but I see several references to James'ideas in his books. One of the journal assignments included in Writing to be Read, for instance, instructs students to "Think of a tape recorder attached directly to your brain" and then "Record your stream-of-consciousness" (161). Macrorie also creates an image of this same flow in Telling Writing when he says, "Listen to yourself speaking inside,. . . [and] . . . get it on paper" (161). He brings in the relationship of this inner flow to memory and experience by saying that "Remembering a stirring event . . . affects . . . the centers of language in our bodies. . . . Then the words flow" (7).

James' notions of a self made up of past selves, all shaped by language and experience, is also very much implicit in Macrorie's texts, especially when he discusses writing about

personal experience. When writers write about themselves, he explains, they tap into a true personal language. Macrorie writes, "We hear the people we've known and remember the things we've seen. . . . And so in a way we are . . . supported by the memory traces of those objects and persons we're calling up." He goes on to say that when we remember the experiences, "no longer are we in them as we were when they occurred," which immediately reminds me of James describing the past self as separate, and yet part of the present self (Telling, 7).

I suggest, then, whether explicitly as in MIller or implicitly as in Macrorie, this school of expressive writing pedagogy assumes, at least sometimes, that the self is "multiple," made up of many past selves, shaped by language and by experience.

Conclusion

What do I do with this evidence, with these exposed assumptions about the kinds of selves we might be implying when we use this expressive writing pedagogy?

Perhaps a first step would be to ask myself even more questions about my teaching, based on the evidence of these different kinds of selves.

One question I might ask is whether any one of these versions of self--or all of them together--are compatible with my own ideas about "selfdom," or with my students' senses of themselves. If not, can I justify using this practice?

If some students resist writing expressively, then perhaps they don't view the self as necessary to discover and tap into.

Do I then insist that they write expressively anyway?

Do I believe that truth and wisdom are found within? Do I want my students to believe this?

Can I accept the assumption that "pretentious" diction derives from an overzealous ego? Is it helpful for my students to view expressive writing in this way?

And if I'm also assuming that my students' selves are somehow a "stream of consciousness" in their heads, formed and shaped by their language, don't I need to make such an assumption explicit and allow my students to weigh its worth for themselves?

Since this school of expressive writing appears to be based in part on psychological principles, can I ignore "psychological" issues that come up? My first aim in a writing class is to teach writing. If such an emphasis on self knowledge and self discovery enhances that process, then it is worthwhile. But if I end up teaching self-discovery under the guise of "expressive writing," am I being fair to my students?

I don't know the answers to all of these questions, but I do know that these and many others need to be asked. By asking such questions, and acting on them, we present ourselves as dedicated teachers first, and critical and reflective teachers always.

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